

**FOR YOUR INFORMATION**

**March 26, 2013**

WASHINGTON, D.C. – USCIRF released the following letter in response to the issuance by the United States Government Accountability Office of its report on the *International Religious Freedom Act*: *State Department and Commission are Implementing Responsibilities but Need to Improve Interaction*. The full report can be found [here](#).

March 12, 2013

Thomas Melito

Director, International Affairs & Trade

United States Government Accountability Office

441 G Street, NW

Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Melito:

I write today on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF; the Commission) regarding the report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) entitled, “International Religious Freedom Act: State Department and Commission Are Implementing Responsibilities but Need to Improve Interaction.” We thank the GAO for undertaking this important investigation of U.S. promotion of international religious freedom abroad. USCIRF Commissioners and staff worked diligently over the past year with GAO’s team of investigators to provide information and answer questions about our work. We appreciate the dedication and professionalism with which the GAO investigators undertook their efforts to understand the complex challenges facing the U.S. government’s global promotion of religious freedom.

We welcome GAO’s finding that USCIRF is implementing its primary responsibilities, as set forth in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). USCIRF consistently has worked to fulfill its statutory requirements as an independent and bipartisan commission to conduct an ongoing review of violations of religious freedom around the world, evaluate U.S. policy, and provide recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress. To that end, USCIRF has proven to be a dependable resource for the U.S. government, providing independent analysis of the worst situations involving severe violations of religious freedom around the world and constructive policy recommendations on how the United States can

effectively encourage governments to respect the right to freedom of religion or belief.

We also appreciate GAO's survey of nongovernmental organizations, and are pleased that the NGO community holds a very positive view of USCIRF's reports, further demonstrating the high quality of our work and our role as an independent and reliable resource.

Regarding interactions with the State Department, in recent years USCIRF Commissioners and staff have endeavored to improve the working relationship with the State Department generally and the Ambassador at Large specifically. The Ambassador at Large, as an *ex officio* Commission member, is welcome to attend all Commission meetings, and USCIRF staff has frequent contact with her office. We welcome the GAO recommendation that the Secretary of State and the USCIRF Chair jointly define how the State Department and USCIRF should interact in our mutual efforts to promote religious freedom. We stand ready for such a consultation.

Regarding the impact of USCIRF's findings and recommendations on bilateral relations, it is important to note that IRFA mandates that USCIRF review the facts and circumstances of religious freedom violations

based on international standards, and make recommendations to the U.S. government. USCIRF's mandate is neither to conduct diplomacy nor balance religious freedom against other U.S. national interests, and we make clear in all documents and meetings that the Commission is an

independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government advisory body, separate and distinct from the Executive Branch and the State Department. However, at times, our findings draw the ire of offending governments that would prefer their shortcomings remain hidden and may result in bilateral friction. We recognize that USCIRF's role sometimes poses a challenge for the State Department, but that role has been mandated by law, and – as the report notes – it also has produced opportunities for proactive diplomacy. USCIRF will continue to make every effort to mitigate confusion while continuing to fulfill our statutory mandate.

Pertaining to the GAO's findings on the State Department, USCIRF for 14 years has been monitoring the State Department's implementation of IRFA. GAO reviewed USCIRF reports that highlight areas where IRFA implementation has fallen short or where Congress' intent has not been fulfilled. For instance, USCIRF has highlighted the lack of annual designations by the State Department of "countries of particular concern" in recent years, the need for more vigorous U.S. government efforts to raise religious freedom concerns in bilateral relations, and the low placement of the Ambassador at Large within the State Department hierarchy. Of these and other issues, we note the report highlights how the Ambassador's organizational status differs from other Ambassadors-at-Large, and that the State Department has provided inconsistent reporting policy and guidance to these Ambassadors.

As USCIRF reports have shown and independent studies verified, violations of the freedom of religion or belief can lead to instability and violence, while respect for religious freedom supports conditions that can lead to peace, prosperity, and stability. At a time when restrictions on religious freedom are increasing and many countries are redefining the state's relation to religion, it is critical that the United States government expand and increase its efforts to protect this fundamental freedom. USCIRF is honored to help the U.S. government in this important endeavor.

Sincerely,

Katrina Lantos Swett

Chair

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner please contact Samantha Schnitzer at (202) 786-0613 or [sschnitzer@uscirf.gov](mailto:sschnitzer@uscirf.gov) .